Russian Short Stories

Anathema

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Anathema by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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“Father Deacon, stop burning that candle. You won’t get far at this rate,” said the archdeacon’s wife. “It’s time to get up.”

This little, thin, sallow-faced woman treated her husband very sternly. When she was still at school, the prevalent opinion there was that all men are rascals, cheats, and tyrants. But the deacon was not a tyrant at all. He was really afraid of his hysterical wife, who was subject to fits. They had no children, as the wife was barren. The archdeacon was of immense stature, weighing over three hundred pounds, with a chest that reminded one of the body of an automobile. He was possessed of a powerful voice and, at the same time, of that gentle condescension, which is so peculiar to exceedingly strong men when they are dealing with very weak persons.

It took the archdeacon a long time to get his voice into proper shape. He had to go through the whole of that painfully long and unpleasant process which is so familiar to all public singers. He, too, had to make local application with cocaine, and with caustic, and gargle his throat with a solution of boric acid. While still in bed, Father Olympy began to try out his voice:

“Via … hmm! … Via-a-a! … Halleluja, halleluja … maa-ma …”

“Don’t seem to sound well, God bless me. Hm, …” thought he to himself.

Just like famous singers, he never trusted his own powers. It is a well-known fact that actors become pale and make the sign of the cross just before coming out. Father Olympy was the same way. And yet, there was not another man in the city, perhaps not in all Russia, who could make the dark, ancient church, with its gilt mosaics, resound to his low notes. He alone could fill every nook and corner of the old building with his mighty voice, and make the cut-glass ornaments on the incense-bowls tinkle in unison.

His wife brought him a glass of weak tea with lemon and, as usual on Sundays, a small glass of vodka. Olympy tested his voice again. “Mi, mi, fa. …”

“Strike that D, mother,” said he.

His wife struck a prolonged, melancholy note.

“Hm … Pharaoh, driving his chariot. … No; doesn’t work. The devil take that writer, what’s his name?”

Father Olympy was a great lover of books. He read them one after another, in any order, never interesting himself much in the writer’s name. His education in the seminary, based mostly on learning things “by heart,” and consisting almost exclusively of memorizing church canons and quotations from the Fathers of the Church, had developed his memory wonderfully. In order to memorize a whole page of the complicated works of such dialecticians as Augustine, Tertullian, Origen, and Basil the Great, all he had to do was to read the lines, and they would

become firmly fixed in his memory. Books for reading were supplied by his friend Smirnov, a student at the Academy. The book he had just read was a beautiful story of life in the Caucasus, where soldiers, Cossacks, and Chechens killed each other, drank wine, married, and hunted wild beasts.

The book aroused the archdeacon's adventurous soul. He read it over three times, and during each reading he cried and laughed with joy, doubled his fists, and turned his huge body from side to side. Of course, it would have been much better if he were a hunter, a fisherman, a horseman; certainly, his place was not in the clergy.

He always came to the church a little later than was necessary; just like the famous barytone at the opera. Approaching the southern gate of the altar, he tested his voice for the last time.

"Hm, hm.... Sounds like D, and that rascal of a regent will be sure to strike C-sharp. But I don't care. I'll get the choir to sing my tone, anyway."

The pride of the popular favorite awoke in him. He knew that the whole city adored him, and that even boys in the streets gathered in crowds to gaze at him, as they did upon the gaping mouth of the enormous trumpet in the military orchestra that played in the public square.

The archbishop came in and was solemnly led to his place. His mitre was tilted a little to the left. Two subdeacons were standing on each side, swaying the censers rhythmically. The clergy, in bright holiday vestments, surrounded the archbishop's seat. Two clergymen brought the images of the

Saviour and the Virgin Mary from the altar.

The church was an old one, and, like Catholic churches, it had a little elevated platform in one corner, with a carved-oak railing around it, and a flight of narrow, winding steps leading up to it.

Slowly, feeling each step and carefully supporting himself by the handrail, as he was always afraid to break something through his awkwardness, the archdeacon mounted the platform, coughed, spit over the railing, touched his tuning-fork, went from C to D, and began the service.

“Bless me, your most gracious Eminence!”

“Oh, no, Mr. Regent. You won’t dare to change the pitch as long as the bishop is here,” he thought. He felt with pleasure at that moment that his voice sounded better than ever, went easily from note to note, and made the air of the whole church tremble with its soft, deep sighs.

It was Quadragesima Sunday, in the first week of Lent. At first there was very little work for Father Olympy. The reader monotonously mumbled the psalms; the deacon, an academician and future professor of homiletics, spoke rapidly through his nose.

From time to time the archdeacon roared, “*We shall attend*,” or, “*We shall pray to the Lord*.” His huge body, in a surplice embroidered with gold, towered over the crowd. He stood there shaking his black, silvering hair, that was like a lion’s mane, and testing his voice from time to time. The church was filled with old women and gray-bearded little old men who reminded

one of fish-traders, or moneylenders.

“It’s funny,” thought Olympy, “that all women’s profiles remind you either of a fish or of a hen’s head! … There’s my wife, too. …”

But his professional habits compelled him to follow closely the service, which was in accordance with the seventeenth-century mass-book. Finally, the psalm-reader finished his part, concluding it with the words: “The Most High Lord, our Master and Creator, Amen.”

Then began the rite of the affirmation of Orthodoxy.

“Who is more supreme than our Lord? Thou, O Lord, art supreme above all, thou, alone, performest miracles.”

The melody was slow, and not very distinct. The service for Quadragesima Sunday and the rite of anathematization may be varied at will. For example, the Holy Church knows anathemas written for special occasions, e.g., anathemas against Ivashka Mazepa, Stenka Razin, the heretic Arius, the iconoclasts, the Archpriest Habakkuk, etc., etc.

But something peculiar happened to the archdeacon that morning, something that had never happened before. Perhaps it was the whiskey that his wife gave him with his tea.

Somehow his thoughts could not become detached from the story he had read the night before. Simple, beautiful, fascinating pictures rose in his mind with unusual clearness and distinctness. But, through sheer force of habit, he completed this part of the service, pronounced the word “Amen,” and concluded:

“This apostolic faith, this paternal faith, this Orthodox faith, this universal faith, affirm.”

The archbishop was an extreme formalist and pedant. He never permitted any omission in the canons of the most blessed Father Andrew of Crete, or the funeral rites, or any other service. And Father Olympy, making the whole church tremble with his mighty voice, and the glass ornaments on the lustres tinkle in unison with it, cursed, anathematized, and excommunicated the following: all iconoclasts, all heretics, beginning with Arius, all followers of the teachings of Italus, the pseudo-monk Nile, Constantine and Irinika, Varlaam and Akindina, Herontius and Isaac Argira, all Mohammedans, Jews, those who mock the Holy Church, those who blaspheme the Day of Annunciation, tavern-keepers who rob widows and orphans, Old Believers, the traitors and rebels Gregory Otrepiev, Timoshka Akundinov, Stenka Razin, Ivashka Mazepa, Emelka Pugachev, and also all who profess faith contrary to the Holy Orthodox faith.

Then followed categorical anathemas against those who refuse the blessing of redemption, who deny the holy sacraments, who do not recognize the councils of the Fathers of the Church and their traditions.

“All those who dare to presume that the Orthodox rulers are not seated on their thrones by the special grace of God, and that at their anointing and their elevation to that high station the blessings of the Holy Ghost do not descend upon them, and who dare, therefore, to rise in rebellion against them and to betray them. … All those who blaspheme and mock the holy

images. …”

And after each exclamation the choir answered him sadly, the gentle, angelic voices groaning the word, “*Anathema*.”

Hysterics began among the women.

The archdeacon had already finished the “Long Life!” service to all the deceased zealots of the church, when the psalm-reader mounted the platform and handed him a short note from the archpriest, in which he was instructed, by the order of the archbishop, to anathematize the “boyard Leo Tolstoy.”—“See Chapt. L of the mass-book,” was added in the note.

The archdeacon’s throat was already tired after its long exertions. Yet he cleared it again and began: “Bless me, your most gracious Eminence.” He scarcely heard the low whisper of the old archbishop:

“May our Lord God bless you, O archdeacon, to anathematize the blasphemer and the apostate from the faith of Christ, rejecting its holy sacraments, the boyard Leo Tolstoy. In the name of Father, and Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

“Amen,” came from the choir.

Suddenly, Father Olympy felt his hair standing erect on his head, becoming hard and heavy, like steel wire. And at the same moment the beautiful words of the story he had read the night before came to him, clear and distinct:

“… awaking, Eroshka raised his head and began to watch intently the night-butterflies, which were flying around the trembling flame of the candle, and falling into it.

"'You fool,' said he. 'Where are you flying? Fool, fool!' And, sitting up, he began to chase the butterflies away from the flame with his thick fingers.

"'Why, you'll get burned, you little fools. Fly over there, there's lots of room,' he was saying gently, catching butterflies by the wings, holding them carefully in his thick fingers, and then letting them go.

"'You're hurting yourself, and I'm trying to save you.'

"My God! Whom am I anathematizing?" thought the archdeacon in terror. "Him? Is it possible? Didn't I weep all night in joy, and rapture, and admiration?"

But, obedient to the traditions of centuries, he continued to hurl those awful, stupefying words of anathema and excommunication, which fell into the crowd like the peals of a huge brass bell.

"... The former priest Nikita, and the monks Sergius, Sabbatius, Dorothius, and Gabriel ... blaspheme the holy sacraments of the church, and will not repent and accept the true church; may they be cursed for such impious doings. ..."

He waited a few moments. His face was now red, streaming with perspiration. The arteries of his neck swelled until they were as thick as a finger. ...

"Once I was sitting by the river and saw a cradle floating down. A perfectly good cradle it was, only one side broken off a little. And then all sorts of thoughts came into my head. Whose cradle is it? Those devils of soldiers of yours must have come to the village, taken the women with them, and some one

of them, maybe, killed the child. Just swung him by the feet and dashed him against the corner of the house. As though such things were not done! There is no soul in men! And such thoughts came to me, such thoughts.… They must have taken the woman with them, I thought, thrown the cradle away, burned the house. And the man, I guess, took his gun and went over to our side to be a robber.

"… And though he tempt the Holy Spirit, like Simon the Magician, or like Ananias and Saphira, returning like a dog to the matter he has vomited, may his days be short and hard, may his prayer lead to sin, may the devil dwell in his mouth, may he be condemned forever, may his line perish in one generation, may the memory of his name be effaced from the earth. And may double, and triple, and numerous curses and anathemas fall upon him. May he be struck with Cain's trembling, Giezius's leprosy, Judas's strangulation, Simon's destruction, Arius's bursting, the sudden end of Ananias and Saphira.… Be he excommunicated and anathematized, and forgiven not even unto death, may his body fall to dust and the earth refuse to accept it, and may a part of it descend into eternal Gehenna, and be tortured there day and night.…"

And his vivid memory brought to his thought more and more of the beautiful words:

"Everything that God has made is for man's joy. There is no sin in anything.… Take a beast, for example. He lives in the Tartar rushes, and in ours.… Wherever he comes, there is his home. He eats whatever God gives him. And our people say that for such doings you will lick hot irons in Hell. Only, I

think that it is not true.”

Suddenly the archdeacon stopped and closed the ancient mass-book with a snap. The words that followed on its pages were even more terrible than those that he had spoken. They were words that could have been conceived only by the narrow minds of the monks who lived in the first centuries of our era.

The archdeacon’s face became blue, almost black; his hands clutched convulsively the railing of his platform. For a second he thought that he was going to faint. But he recovered himself. Straining the utmost resources of his mighty voice, he began solemnly:

“To the joy of our earth, to the ornament and the flower of our life, to the true comilitant and servant of Christ, to the boyard Leo. …”

He became silent for a second. There was not a whisper, not a cough, not a sound in the crowded church. It was that awful moment of silence when a large crowd is mute, obedient to one will, seized by one feeling. And now, the archdeacon’s eyes reddened and became suffused with tears, his face suddenly became radiant with that beauty which can transform the face of a man when in the ecstasy of inspiration. He coughed again, and suddenly, filling the whole edifice with his terrible voice, roared:

“Lo-o-ong li-i-ife.”

And, instead of lowering his candle, as is done in the rite of anathematization, he raised it high above his head.

It was in vain that the regent hissed at his choirboys, struck

them on the heads with his tuning-fork, closed their mouths with his hand. Joyfully, like the silvery sounds of the archangels' trumpets, their voices rang out through the church: "Long life! Long life!"

In the meantime, Father Prior, Father Provost, an official of the Consistory, the psalm-reader, and the archdeacon's wife had mounted on the platform.

"Let me alone.... Let me alone..." said Father Olympy in a wrathful, hissing whisper, contemptuously brushing aside Father Provost. "I've spoiled my voice, but it was for the glory of the Lord. Go away."

He took off the surplice embroidered with gold, reverently kissed the stole, made the sign of the cross, and came down. He went out through the aisle, towering over the crowd, immense, majestic, and sad, and people involuntarily moved away, experiencing strange fear. As if made of stone, he walked past the archbishop's place without even glancing at it.

It was only in the churchyard that his wife caught up with him. Crying and pulling him by the sleeve, she began to shriek:

"What have you done, you crazy idiot? Got drunk in the morning, and started up.... It'll be lucky if they only send you to some monastery to clean cesspools. How much trouble I'm going to have now, and all on account of you, you blockhead!"

"Doesn't make any difference," said the archdeacon, looking at the ground. "I'll go as a common laborer, become a switchman or a janitor, but I won't serve in the church any more. I'll go tomorrow. Don't want it any more. My soul can't stand it. I

believe truly, according to the symbol of the faith, yes, I believe in Christ and the Apostolic Church. Yet I feel no wrath."

And then again, the familiar, beautiful words rushed through his mind:

"Everything that God has made is for man's joy."

"Idiot! Blockhead!" shrieked his wife. "I'll send you to the insane asylum.... I'll go to the governor, to the Tsar.... Got drunk out of his senses, the blockhead."

Then Father Olympy paused, turned around, and, opening wide his large, angry eyes, said sternly and heavily:

"Well?"

For the first time his wife became timidly silent. She turned away from her husband, covered her face with a handkerchief, and burst into tears.

And he walked on, immense, dark, and majestic, like a monument.